

The day-star of approaching morn: The relationship between the Unitarians and the Brahmo Samaj

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Introduction

The visit of Rammohun Roy to Britain in 1831-1833 has continuing significance in many ways: as an early example of interfaith dialogue; an illustration of British views of India, and the Indian response to Christianity; and an example of the syncretism that can occur when one religious tradition meets another. His campaign for the abolition of *sati* (widow-burning) confronts many ethical and cultural issues which are still debated today (Stein, 1988: 465). His encounter with other faiths also raises the issue of what it means to convert to another faith, or whether this is even possible (Zastoupil, 2002: 227), since Roy could not accept the doctrines of mainstream Christianity, and was among those who called into question the sincerity of Indian converts to Christianity, many of whom were low-caste individuals who may have been motivated by economic gain.

He also called into question what is meant by Christianity in his writings (Roy, 1825), which were published in England by the Unitarian Society.

Roy's story also raises the issue of what religion is – is it the original form or impulse, or the “accretions” which subsequently accumulate, or a combination of these? Is it about values, beliefs, or practices, or a combination of these? All of these issues were raised by Roy and his contemporaries over his views and those of the Unitarians, and the issues are still being debated today in many contexts.

This article aims to show that the link between the Unitarians and the Brahmo Samaj has been maintained since Roy's death.

Raja Rammohun Roy Bahadur (1772-1833)

Rammohun Roy was born into a Brahmin family in Radhanagore, India. He learnt Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit and Bengali, and was said to have visited Tibet to learn about Buddhism – although it is more likely that he went to Bhutan on business (Killingley, 2004). After his father's death in 1803, he moved to Murshidabad, where in 1805, he published a treatise called *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin* ("A Gift to Monotheism"), which offended Muslims because it criticised their intolerance of Hindus (Salmond, 2004: 49). He also held discussions with free-thinking Muslims, Hindus and Jains. He began to learn English, and also translated Vyasa's version of the Vedas and the Upanishads and read the *Kalpa Sutra* (a Jain text), and studied Tantra. His publications included *Vedanta* (1815), *Ishopanishad* (1816), *Kathopanishad* (1817), *Moonduk Upanishad* (1819), *The Precepts of Jesus - Guide to Peace*

and Happiness (1820), *Sambad Kaumudi* - a Bengali newspaper (1821), *Mirat-ul-Akbar* - Persian journal (1822), *Bengali Grammar* (1826), *Brahmapasona* (1828), *Brahmasangeet* (1829) and *The Universal Religion* (1829). He promoted monotheism and campaigned for women's rights and education and for the abolition of *sati*. He also learnt Latin, Greek and Hebrew. He converted a Baptist missionary, William Adam, to Unitarianism – known thereafter to Baptists as the “fall of the second Adam” (Salmond, 2004: 46) – and disliked the doctrine of the Trinity almost as much as he disliked Hindu polytheism (Brahmo Samaj, undated).

The Brahmo Samaj (One God Society) was inaugurated by Roy and others in August 1828 at the house of Feranghi Kamal Bose. It was originally called a Unitarian society (Zastoupil, 2002: 225). By 1830, it was sufficiently well-established for him to leave it in the hands of friends and go to England to campaign against the repeal of the Suttee Act passed in 1829. Oddly, the pro-*sati* Dharma Sabha was represented by an Englishman, a Francis Bathie (Mani, 1998: 65), who at his death was Deputy Sheriff of Calcutta (Jefferies et al., 1840: 332). The success of the campaign for the abolition of *sati* was one of Roy's most significant achievements (Mani, 1987: 120) and in 1818 he wrote *A Conference between an Advocate for, and an Opponent of the Practice of Burning Widows Alive* (Mani, 1998:22), followed in 1820 by *A Second Conference Between an Advocate for, and An Opponent of the Practice of Burning Widows Alive* (Roy, 1820). Here he rejected a feature of the Hindu tradition, while at the same time appearing as a defender of that tradition against a false interpretation, just as he had done with polytheism and 'idolatry' (Killingley, 2004). His antipathy to *sati* also formed part of his general sympathy and respect for women and their rights and education (Burton, 1995: 554). He was not the only campaigner for abolition, but he was one of the most prominent (Mani, 1998: 22).

The *sati* debate is interesting because, in formulating arguments for or against, the colonial authorities asked *pandits* to draw upon Hindu scriptures to ascertain whether or not it was required by the Hindu religion (Mani, 1987: 122). They assumed an 'unreflective indigenous obedience to these texts' (Mani, 1987: 125). Pollock (1993: 101), however, says that the British were drawing upon pre-colonial power structures rather than imposing new ones; the justification of *sati* by appeals to Sanskrit texts occurred before the British colonial period.

This does suggest, however, that the British were projecting their idea of what religion is like onto Hinduism – they were used to the scriptures being used as a source of authority in their own tradition, so they assumed it was the same in Hinduism (Mani, 1987: 125). Ironically, opponents of *sati* usually constructed the widows as helpless victims (whether or not they resisted immolation), while its proponents constructed them as heroic and saintly. But both Roy and some European commentators pointed out the economic aspects of the practice, since the heirs stood to gain financially from the widow's death. However, the colonial officials were slow to outlaw the practice; they merely regulated it instead. One *vyawastha* (pandit's opinion) showing that the scriptures did not support it

was marginalised and ignored (Mani, 1987: 134). One commentator assumed that when people acted in accordance with religion, they were passively obedient; but if they were acting consciously, they could not also be acting religiously (Mani, 1987: 125) and thereby constructed religion as blind obedience to tradition. They also assumed that the peasantry was ill-informed about religion, and that by returning to sources of scriptural authority, they were 'giving back to the natives the truths of their own "little read and less understood Shaster" (PP [1821], 532).' It is very clear that they are viewing the Hindu scene very much through a Protestant lens, regarding the priestly caste as corrupt and themselves as 'protecting the "weak against the "artful" (Mani, 1987: 127).

Once in England, Roy toured the country and met many people of all walks of life, including George IV (whose coronation he attended) and Jeremy Bentham, who had Unitarian sympathies and many Unitarian friends (Zastoupil, 2002: 236). Roy presented three papers on the Revenue System of India, the Judicial System of India and the Material Condition of India to a committee of the House of Commons.

Religious and political thinkers sought him out to engage in spirited discussions, and Dissenting and Anglican clergymen vied with each other for the honor of his presence at their services. Prominent middle-class reformers were constantly at his side, their daughters or unmarried sisters often especially attentive to him. And, while in Manchester, a crowd of factory workers followed Rammohun about on his tour, the men and women insisting on shaking his hand or embracing him. (Zastoupil, 2002: 215)

He addressed the Unitarian annual meeting in London, and was invited to Bristol by the Reverend Lant Carpenter, where he stayed at Mary Carpenter's home until his untimely death from meningitis on 27 September 1833. He was buried in Arnos Vale cemetery in Bristol, and an annual service has been held at his tomb ever since, conducted by the Unitarian minister of Bristol. The Brahmo Samaj are regular attenders at this event, and they have photographs of it on their website (Chanda, 2003).

A statue of Rammohun Roy (paid for by the Indian government) was erected in central Bristol in 1997. Three years later, there were letters of complaint in the Bristol Evening Post (May 2003). A local Unitarian wrote in defence of Roy's legacy and importance, and so did two other people; the rest of the letters complained about the 'political correctness' of having a statue of an Indian person in such a prominent position. There were no less than three spellings of Rammohun, all incorrect (it is usually written Rammohun, Rammohan, Ram Mohan or Ram Mohun). The controversy was also referenced in *Overseas Indian: Connecting India with its diaspora* (an online magazine) three years later – which shows how writing to your local paper is no longer a 'local' affair.

Roy's visit also had political implications, in that there was some talk of him standing for Parliament, and his association with radical dissenters like the Unitarians was of

considerable assistance in their agenda of reform and the disentanglement of church and state (Zastoupil, 2002: 220).

Roy's deist views, his struggles with Hindu orthodoxy and debates with Baptist missionaries over the doctrine of the Trinity and the nature of Christ, and the fact that his family was said to have disowned him for his views, all resonated strongly with the Unitarians of the 1820s and 1830s, who faced persecution by the authorities (the 1689 Toleration Act was not extended to them), legal disputes over chapels and endowments, frequent blasphemy charges, and public objections to their involvement in politics and campaigning (Zastoupil, 2002: 230). There was considerable dispute (between the Baptist missionaries of Serampore and the Unitarian Thomas Aspland) over whether Unitarians were Christians, and whether Roy himself was one; this depended on whether Christianity was defined according to values and monotheism, or by belief in the divinity of Christ (Zastoupil, 2002: 231). In declaring Roy to be a Christian, early nineteenth century Unitarians perhaps sought to broaden the definition of Christianity to include themselves (Zastoupil, 2002: 232). Roy used the same techniques and sources as the Unitarians to answer his critics: German biblical criticism, the history of the Arian controversy, the discourse of radical dissenters, and rational scepticism (Zastoupil, 2002: 234).

However, the attempts of his Unitarian contemporaries to claim him as a convert to Christianity show the tensions that existed around defining Christianity (Zastoupil, 2002: 231). His mother and sister attempted to have him declared an apostate from Hinduism (Salmond, 2004: 93), but it seems that he continued to regard himself as a Hindu (Mani, 1998: 46), so there were problems in defining Hinduism, too. The idea that Hinduism is a single unified religion is difficult to justify, since there are many different perspectives (monotheism, monism and polytheism), scriptures (the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* etc.), and practices such as *bhakti* and *smṛti* (Baird, 1968: 28).

It was probably Rammohun Roy who was the first Hindu to use the word Hinduism, in 1816. According to King (1999: 165),

The Oxford English Dictionary traces "Hindooism" to an 1829 reference in the *Bengalee*, (Vol 43), and also refers to an 1858 usage by the German Indologist Max Müller. Dermot Killingley, however, cites a reference to "Hindooism" by Rammohun Roy in 1816. As Killingley suggests, "Rammohun was probably the first Hindu to use the word Hinduism." One hardly need mention the extent to which Roy's conception of the 'Hindu' religion was conditioned by European, Muslim and Unitarian theological influences.

However, Baird (1968: 25) says that the search for an 'essence' of religion is futile, since one person's 'essence' would be regarded by someone else as only a perspective. So although attempts to build bridges between different traditions by examining their similarities are laudable, they will not succeed in finding an essence of religion because

'the so-called essence is always found in local garb' (Baird, 1968: 27).

Since the encounter with Rammohun Roy, Unitarianism has increasingly included and acknowledged a variety of faith positions.

Unitarians in Britain and America were excited by the events in Calcutta:

Rammohun was instrumental in founding the Calcutta Unitarian committee in 1821, a group drawn from both the European and Indian communities. Over the next several years the committee established a Unitarian press, created a library, began conducting worship services (with William Adam serving as minister) and proceeded with plans to construct a chapel (Collett 131–33, 164–65). News of the Calcutta committee and its activities electrified Anglo-American Unitarians. From 1822 onward, many of them began exchanging letters and publications with Rammohun (Lavan 57–72). Ideas clearly flowed in both directions, as Belsham and Rees sent Rammohun their publications (Biswas, *Correspondence* I 174–90, 317–25) while Rammohun sent copies of his own works in return and offered his opinion on the feasibility of Unitarian missions in India. (Zastoupil, 2002: 234)

The Calcutta Unitarian committee had ceased to function by 1828, and he founded the Brahmo Samaj instead, which was organised more firmly around Hindu concepts (Zastoupil, 2002: 235).

Although Roy himself seemed, in one of his last speeches, somewhat bemused by, or perhaps modestly self-effacing about, the attention he received from Unitarians (Roy, 1832), the connections between Unitarianism and the Brahmo Samaj have continued to be maintained over the years, both in Bristol and beyond. Rammohun Roy's universalist views continue to resonate with many people today – as Sumit Chanda said in his 2003 address at Roy's tomb,

he was the original Multiculturalist ... He perceived that Universal Truth was expressed in different ways. There were different nuances in different cultural, geographical and historical settings. From the Hindu scripture, Vedanta, he learnt about Brahma, the one Supreme Being who is the source and sustainer of the universe. In Islam, he admired the theme of the equality of man. In Christianity, he found the ethical and social guidance appealing.

The Unitarians had a broad political and social impact in nineteenth-century Britain, as they actively participated in civic life and social reform, and circulated their and Rammohun Roy's ideas widely (Zastoupil, 2002: 238). Their reform agendas were similar: freedom of the press (Unitarians founded the Manchester Guardian; Roy helped to establish several newspapers in Calcutta), the education of women (both founded colleges); and the promotion of welfare in this life rather than in the afterlife (Zastoupil, 2002: 239).

Zastoupil (2002: 240) suggests that:

His celebrity should thus be read as evidence of Victorian society in the making: Britons thronged to see Rammohun because in him they could see reflected what the dismantling of the established order held in store for themselves.

This, and Roy's dialogue and correspondence with the Unitarians in the 1820s, suggests that, whilst he was partly influenced by Western ideas, he also had a profound influence on the thinking of Westerners. He believed that there is a universal truth underlying all religions that can be apprehended by reason (Medhurst, 1992: 9), but his reformism was definitely from a Hindu perspective (Salmond, 2004: 41). He had also brought a Brahmin cook with him to England (Mani, 1998: 46), which suggests that he was still a practising Hindu. Roy's ideas fed into the Unitarian tradition, which had had a strong deist strand since its foundation as a denomination (Uglow, 2002: 169, 236). Roy corresponded with the leading Unitarians of the day, and reinforced their rationalist views (Richards and Hughes, 2007).

Both Roy and some Unitarians believed that there was a primal form of religion which centred on the worship of a single immanent deity and belief in an afterlife, and that all other forms of religion were merely corruptions of this original form (Medhurst, 1992: 9, 13). This raises the question of what religion is – is it the original impulse or inspiration, or is it the accumulation of tradition? British observers of Hinduism tried to define Hinduism by its source texts, in much the same way as the Protestant Reformation had tried to return to a pure and original form of Christianity (Mani, 1987: 127).

Mary Carpenter (1807-1877) and her Unitarian contemporaries

Mary Carpenter was deeply affected by Roy's visit and his death, and wrote several sonnets in praise of him. These are highly revealing of the beliefs of Unitarians at the time, and the attitude of Westerners, even progressive liberal ones, to 'the East' (Medhurst, 1992: 12-17), and it is somewhat surprising to late-twentieth century Unitarians how 'orthodox' Mary Carpenter's rhetoric is (Medhurst, 1992: 17). She regarded India as 'pagan', 'wandering children', and referred to 'India's darkened shore' and Indian women 'trembling midst the dismal night of pagan horrors' and contrasted this with Rammohun's vision of the 'day-star of approaching morn' – a Unitarianism that would persuade India to accept Christ's message (Medhurst, 1992: 9-13). Similarly, Thomas Belsham (1750–1829, a prominent Unitarian) referred to 'the folly and absurdity of the Hindoo [sic] mythology and of idol worship' and 'their impious, barbarous and idolatrous rites' (Medhurst, 1992: 4).

Mary Carpenter had been very impressed by Roy's view of Indian women, but was

not immune to projecting Western values onto the Indian way of life (Burton, 1995: 556). She had been convinced that Roy was a convert to Unitarian Christianity (Medhurst, 1992: 15). However, she did defy convention by travelling in India without an attendant, and socialising with educated Indians, including the Tagore family (Burton, 1995: 557). Burton (1995) analyses Carpenter's response to the sight of semi-naked Indians in some depth, and concludes that she was disturbed by the encounter and by her own reactions to it, but used this, and her experience of *zenana* life as sunless and airless, to justify her intervention in the lives of Indian women. When Keshub Chandra Sen visited her in Bristol in 1870, wrote his biographer, P. C. Majumdar, she

took in hand her oriental guest most completely and, with her well-known discipline, gave him incessant direction about the usages and etiquettes of English society. Her restless spirit of reform criticised his dress, his diet, even the manner of combing his hair; in fact she hemmed him in with so many warnings, injunctions and engagements that the mild Hindu reformer felt inconveniently straitened. We are afraid Miss Carpenter at times found Keshub an intractable pupil, and in the end something like a coolness sprang up between them, but Keshub bravely pulled through the crisis at Red Lodge. (cited in Burton, 1998: 40)

In 1864, two Brahmo Samajes, **Satyendranath Tagore** (brother of Rabindranath) and **Monomohun Ghose** (a Bengali barrister), paid a visit to Mary Carpenter in Bristol while on a pilgrimage to Roy's grave and fired her with an enthusiasm for the education of Indian women (Burton, 1995: 554-555).

Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-1884)

Keshub Chandra Sen was a subsequent leader of the Brahmo Samaj. He preached at Lewin's Mead Unitarian chapel, Bristol, in 1870, i.e. 43 years after Roy's death; there is a plaque on the side of that building commemorating this (Contractor, 1983). He had a rapprochement with Hindu thinking, in that he was less antagonistic towards polytheism than Roy had been; but this rapprochement was insufficient to prevent a split in the Brahmo Samaj over the issue of Hindu nationalism (Lipski, 1971: 224), which some felt Sen was insufficiently enthusiastic about. However, he did ensure that the Brahmo Samaj was firmly rooted in Hindu tradition, whilst acknowledging the validity of other traditions; according to Gordon (1968: 199),

Rammohan Roy's monotheistic, purified Hinduism was spread in the nineteenth century by the Brahmo Samaj. This reformed Hinduism was formulated partially to meet the challenges of Western missionaries, but the insistence on monotheism and

congregational forms of worship and the antagonism to idolatry shows that Christian terms had been in part acceded to as criteria for an acceptable religion. The Brahmo Samaj split several times during the nineteenth century and some members tried to meet the need for a more emotional religion by reviving the cult of devotion prevalent in Bengali Vaisnavism since the sixteenth century. The major links between Vaisnavism and the Brahmo Samaj were Keshub Chunder Sen and Bijoy Krsna Goswami, religious teachers who attracted a number of eminent Bengali disciples in the later part of the nineteenth century. To meet criticism that Brahmoism was really Christianity in disguise, their disciples could demonstrate that their religion had deep roots in the soil of Bengali tradition.

The difficulty for observers in deciding whether the Brahmo Samaj was Christian or Hindu perhaps derives from a confusion about whether it is values, practices, tradition or beliefs (or all of these) that define religious adherence.

Sen's visit to Britain for seven months in 1870 was as much of a social whirlwind as Roy's visit, and he suffered a breakdown two months into his visit as a result. He met John Stuart Mill (the utilitarian philosopher), Frances Power Cobbe (a feminist and theist), Queen Victoria, William Gladstone, J R Seeley (a historian), Max Müller (the noted orientalist), and "gave literally dozens of talks at Unitarian chapels, temperance societies, city halls, theistic and philosophical societies" (Burton, 1998: 38-39). It was estimated that he had met as many as 40,000 Britons and was a household name; there was even a 'sarcastic little ditty' written about him in *Punch* (Burton, 1998: 39). His meeting with Mary Carpenter was somewhat unsatisfactory, as she made numerous comments about his appearance and manners. He resisted all attempts to convert him to anything like mainstream Christianity; in his address to the Swedenborg Society in June 1870, he 'decried many of the tenets and cultural forms of British Christianity' (Burton, 1998: 41). However, there was considerable controversy both in Britain and among the Brahmo Samaj when he gave his under-age daughter Sunity in marriage to the Maharajah of Cooch Behar; as a result, Britain returned to its love-affair with Rammohun Roy (Burton, 1998: 41-42).

Pratap Chandra Majumdar (1840-1905)

Pratap Chandra Majumdar was a member of the Brahmo Samaj who accompanied Sen on his trip to Britain in 1870 (Burton, 1998: 38); lectured in America in 1883 (Hay, 1962: 439) and attended the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, where he led those gathered in the "Universal Prayer, 'Our Father Who Art in Heaven'" and spoke on the topic of "The World's Religious Debt to Asia", in which he outlined the importance of Nature and the immanence of the divine (Seager and Kidd, 1993: 440):

The first gift conferred by Asia on the religious world is insight into nature. The Oriental discovers, contemplates, and communes with the Spirit of God who, in his view, fills all creation.

Nature is not a mere stimulus to mild poetry; *Nature is God's abode*. He did not create it and then leave it to itself, but he lives in every particle of its great structure. Nature is not for man's bodily benefit, but for his spiritual emancipation also.

In the same speech, he went on to quote Guru Nanak, the Persian poet Sadi, and Yogavasista.

Majumdar was also an internationally renowned homoeopath (Parishad, 2001), and wrote the biography of Keshub Chandra Sen (Burton, 1998: 38).

World Parliament of Religions (1893)

The 1893 World Parliament of Religions was suggested by a Swedenborgian lawyer (Chryssides, 1998: 75), and was co-organised by the Free Religious Association, founded in 1867 by a group of Unitarians who affirmed that a universal spirit underlay all historic faiths (Hill, undated: 16). There was a dispute between the Unitarians, who wanted 'parity of esteem' for all the faiths attending, and Barrows, a Presbyterian who took the Chair, who believed that the best religion would win out (Chryssides, 1998: 75).

The Parliament has been described as the occasion on which the Eastern religions were introduced to the West 'as serious alternatives' (Chryssides, 1998: 75). They could no longer be regarded (by liberals at least) as idolatry and superstition, but were to be taken seriously as proper religions.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American Unitarian, read Rammohun Roy's translation of the Hindu scriptures, and together with Thoreau, promoted Transcendentalism; Singh (1991: 588) notes that,

Though neither Emerson nor Thoreau makes any significant reference to Roy in his writings, it is well known that they were familiar with his work. Emerson read Roy's translation of *Ishopanishad* in 1820 and Thoreau his translation of the principal Vedas in 1850.

The correspondence between Roy and British Unitarians was published in Boston in 1824 by Henry Ware, a prominent American Unitarian (Singh, 1991: 588).

It is worth noting that Transcendentalism had a profound influence on modern American Paganism (Clifton, 1998). Emerson and Thoreau also influenced Walt Whitman (Folsom and Price, 1998) who influenced Edward Carpenter (Taylor, 1998), a significant figure in the English Pagan revival (Hutton, 1999: 27). Transcendentalism was heavily influenced by Hindu ideas. According to Singh (1991: 577):

the New England transcendentalists Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, absorbed many ideas from their wide reading in Indian theology, philosophy, and classical literature. Emerson was widely read in Vedic literature as well as the Upanishads, the Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita, Vishnu Purana, and the works of Kalidasa. Though he did not assimilate all that he read and even distorted some Hindu philosophical ideas, Hindu thought had a tremendous impact on him. India became, as he said, an El Dorado, a country of the mind that opened new horizons to him. The "grandeur of . . . ethical statement" that he found in Hindu thought, and the vague immensities that it suggested, fertilized a mind wishing to turn away from the aridities of modern science and religion. He began to perceive the common denominator between different religions. From the Vedanta he developed his notion of the Over-Soul; his views on man's place in the universe and how he is to be saved from evil also come from aspects of Hindu thought. Even the language and imagery of some of his works are borrowed from Indian texts.

The ideas of Emerson and his friends caused a split in American Unitarianism between conservatives who believed that salvation was still required, even though they did not believe that people were naturally depraved, and those who

came to resemble the Brahmo Samaj founded by Roy in Calcutta in 1828: like the Brahmos, the liberal Unitarians believed in God and prayer, but they did away with ritual, doctrine, and form, substituting for them the concept of a moral life based on love, the supreme practitioner of which was Jesus (Singh, 1991: 589).

Emerson rejected revealed religion and thought that people should 'acquaint themselves "at first hand with deity"' (Hill, undated: 15).

Bipincandra Pal, another Hindu moderniser who joined the Brahmo Samaj in 1877 (Lipski, 1971: 224), found solace for a bereavement in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, which confirms that the Brahmo Samaj and the Unitarians were still exchanging ideas:

In particular, the American transcendentalist helped him, the Hindu, to gain what appeared to him a true understanding of Hinduism (Lipski, 1971: 225)

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

Rabindranath Tagore, philosopher and poet, came of a family who had been members of the Brahmo Samaj since its founding (Rabindra Bharati Museum, undated). He found a kindred spirit in WB Yeats, the poet of the Celtic Twilight, and Yeats in turn influenced the Pagan revival (Hutton, 1999: 27). Yeats (1913) wrote, in the introduction to

the English edition of Tagore's poem Gitanjali,

I have carried the manuscript of these translations about with me for days,
reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I
have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me.
These lyrics ... display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long.

Tagore's visits to America (in 1912-13, 1916-17, 1920-21, 1929 and 1930) totalled seventeen months in all (Hay, 1962: 439). He loved the writings of Emerson, in which he found 'much that is of India' and Whitman, whose poems he felt were 'deeply imbued with Eastern ideas and feelings' (Hay, 1962: 440). This was perhaps unsurprising, since Emerson had been influenced by Roy's translations of the Vedas and Upanishads (Singh, 1991: 588), and Whitman was influenced by Emerson and Thoreau (Pannapacker, 1998).

In 1912, Tagore was invited to speak to a Unitarian group interested in comparative religion:

The fifty-one year old poet-philosopher made such an impression that he was asked to talk again on subsequent Sunday evenings. It is not strange that his ideas should have struck a responsive chord among American Unitarians, for he derived them from the monotheistic teachings of the Brahmo Samaj ('the Society of God'), whose founder Rammohun Roy both influenced and was influenced by the nascent Unitarian movement in England and the United States in the 1820s and 1830s. (Hay, 1962: 442)

While in America, Tagore wrote several letters to his friend William Rothenstein (a Jewish-German artist), and both Tagore and Rothenstein appear in a photograph of the London Brahmo Samaj in 1912 (Chanda, 2007). It was Rothenstein who introduced Tagore to W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound (Sen, 1966: 276). Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, and whilst the *New York Times* was disparaging of the award being given to a Hindu, the *New York Tribune*, the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* and the weekly *Outlook* all took it as a sign of East and West drawing closer together (Hay, 1962: 445). He gave lectures in many major cities on the evils of nationalism and militarism, and his ideas were widely praised, but did not escape criticism – the *Tacoma News Ledger* complained that he advocated a 'regime of pantheistic meditation in the primitive woods' (Hay, 1962: 448). In many ways his ideas were markedly apolitical – he was critical of the appeal of politics to emotion rather than reason, and called for Americans to look inward to find an 'inner liberation through which the individual personality realizes its identity with all other beings' (Hay, 1962: 462).

Tagore also gave a lecture as President of the Preliminary Meeting of the

Rammohun Roy Centenary held at the Senate House, Calcutta, on 18 February 1933 (Tagore, 1933), in which he emphasised both Roy's situatedness in Indian culture, and his international stature.

Tagore has continued to be esteemed by Unitarians, and an extract from his *Gitanjali* was read at the funeral of John Andrew Storey (1935-1997), who wrote thirty-two hymns for the Unitarian hymn-book *Hymns for Living* (Knight and Dawson, 1985), drawing on Mahayana Buddhism, Akhenaton, Omar Khayyam, science, Hinduism, humanism, universalism, Confucius and Chinese thought, the current Dalai Lama, ecology and nature, multiculturalism, Socrates, and the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. Even when writing about the Nativity, he affirms the universal incarnation of the Divine in each birth. A Tagore poem is also included in *Hymns for Living*. An earlier Unitarian hymn-writer, **William Channing Gannett** (1840-1923) also referenced other faiths in one of his hymns; he was a Transcendentalist, and after the American Civil War worked for several years on projects related to the newly-freed slaves (Lewis, 2006).

Tagore's friendship with Gandhi is also interesting. They were good friends, but had a number of philosophical differences. Tagore was concerned that Gandhi's campaign for simplicity was too prescriptive, and regarded some of his views as irrational. He also viewed non-cooperation as a "negative impulse that does not rejuvenate the withered polity and economy and contains the seeds of intolerance and destruction" (Govindu, 2003). He also criticised Gandhi's fasting, as he was worried that other people would copy it; but he rushed to see Gandhi at Poona when he broke his first fast, and during this time they drew closer together. He was strongly in favour of education and criticised Gandhi's boycott of schools. They held debates in public through their respective journals, but were friends in private, and addressed each other as Mahatma and Gurudev. Tagore wanted a rational basis to society, and his philanthropy was more generalised; Gandhi was more mystical, but his philanthropic efforts were more specific to particular circumstances (Govindu, 2003). It could be argued that Tagore was more influenced by the West than Gandhi, but his ideas also stemmed from the Brahmo Samaj, which was grounded in Bengali culture (Gordon, 1968: 199).

Joseph Estlin Carpenter (1844-1927)

Joseph Estlin Carpenter (a prominent theologian, nephew of Mary Carpenter, and her biographer) was invited to speak at an anniversary celebration of the Brahmo Samaj. He was also named after the family doctor who attended at Roy's deathbed (Chryssides, 1998: 71). After his ministerial career was terminated by the onset of a bad stammer, he went on to study comparative religion, biblical criticism, and studied Pali under the eminent scholar of Buddhism, T. W. Rhys Davids (Chryssides, 1998: 72). He was also invited to speak at the World's Parliament of Religions; he was unable to attend, but sent a paper which was read out (Chryssides, 1998: 75). His grandfather was Lant Carpenter and his aunt was Mary Carpenter. His father was an eminent naturalist. According to Long

(2004), his family were members of Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel, Hampstead (the same chapel that played host to Brahmo Samaj meetings in the 1950s). From 1914 until 1924 he was the Wilde lecturer in comparative religion at Oxford University.

Always firmly committed to the Unitarian tradition in all its aspects, Carpenter was an untiring advocate of friendly relations with all the great world faiths, and especially with the religions of the East, of which he had an astonishingly detailed knowledge. He also fostered and encouraged close contacts with liberal churches in India and Japan. In his own personal life, as was always evident from his conduct of worship, he possessed a rich and emphatically Christian spirituality, characterized by a deep assurance of an all-embracing divine love. Here, perhaps, was the source of his unswerving belief in a universal revelation. (Long, 2004)

The International Association for Religious Freedom (founded 1901)

The IARF was founded in 1901 as a result of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, and was originally called the International Council of Unitarian and other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers, and after various name-changes, settled on the name International Association for Religious Freedom in 1969 (Chryssides, 1998: 76). The Brahmo Samaj are also involved in the IARF, as well as the Rissho Kosei-kai (a Japanese Buddhist group), the Guru Nanak Foundation, the Ramakrishna Institute, humanists and 'traditional primal religions' (Chryssides, 1998: 76).

Recently, a third-generation Brahmo Samaje and Unitarian Universalist minister, Rev. Abhi Janamanchi, was elected to the governing board of the IARF. According to the organisation's website (2002), "[b]ecause of his Indian background and connections, and his North American locus, he brings a unique perspective to the Council."

The IARF is, in part, a response to globalisation – the awareness of the multiplicity of religions in the world. Its aims are:

- Freedom from oppressive interference or discrimination by the state, government or society's institutions on the grounds of religion or belief;
- Mutual understanding, respect and the promotion of harmony, or at least "tolerance", between communities or individuals of different religions or beliefs;
- An essential accountability by religious communities to ensure that their own practices uphold the fundamental dignity and human rights of their members and others. (IARF, 2007)

In the 1950s, a group of Brahmo Samajis met at Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel (of which Joseph Estlin Carpenter was once minister), and since 1972, they have met at

Golders Green Unitarian Chapel.

A personal perspective

Personally, as someone who is in the process of joining the Unitarians whilst retaining my Pagan identity and beliefs, but wishing to acknowledge the spiritual heritage of all faiths including Christianity, I find the story of Rammohun Roy to be of immense significance. I have long admired him for his campaign to abolish *sati*, which I first found out about from a book of Bristol local history (Belsey, 1992: 55), and I have always admired Unitarians for their commitment to interfaith dialogue. When I discovered that this commitment dated back to their origins in eighteenth-century deism (Uglow, 2002: 169, 236) and the encounter with Rammohun Roy, I was even more interested.

Conclusion

It can be seen from all this that Unitarians and Brahmo Samajes remained in contact (albeit sporadic) throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, until the contact was formalised by their association in the IARF. This positive encounter between East and West also helped to feed Hindu ideas into the Pagan revival, via Emerson (Clifton, 1998) and Yeats (Yeats, 1913; Hutton: 1999: 27).

Notwithstanding the almost conventionally Christian views of Mary Carpenter and Thomas Belsham, the encounter between Rammohun Roy and the Unitarians has since been construed as the first example of an interfaith encounter that was viewed by both sides as a meeting of equals, so much so that Mary Carpenter's 'orthodox' views are surprising to late twentieth century Unitarians (Medhurst, 1992: 17). The encounter can certainly be viewed as an important milestone in the history of interfaith dialogue, especially as the conversation between the Unitarians and the Brahmo Samaj has continued until now.

Universalism is one response to the increasing awareness of other religions; it is increasingly difficult for any religion to maintain that it is the sole possessor of truth (Hughes and Storey, 2000: 9). Hence it seems that Rammohun Roy and his intellectual heirs still have something to say to us; as Sumit Chanda said, Roy was the first multiculturalist, who 'perceived that Universal Truth was expressed in different ways' (Chanda, 2003).

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